



Priests of Joy

The Ministry of Reconciliation — Part 3



Bible Studies for Adults

BIBLE STUDIES FOR ADULTS

The Ministry of Reconciliation — Part 3

Priests of Joy

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The Ministry of Reconciliation — Part 3

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Passage Prologue

The Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:14 — 6:2

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says:

"In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you."

Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Series and Quarterly Introductions

This year's quarterlies are dedicated to what the apostle Paul called "the ministry of reconciliation." What is reconciliation and this essential ministry? The exciting truth is revealed in one of the Bible's most profound passages: 2 Corinthians 5:14 — 6:2 (see "Passage Prologue" on opposite page). We will take our time this year exploring it and learning how to participate in it.

The ministry, message, and ministers of reconciliation Paul writes about correspond to the three central agents addressed in the text. These form the basis of the first three quarterlies, each focusing on one agent and His role in reconciliation and the divine relationship in which they all partake.

The Author of the ministry of reconciliation is our heavenly Father. In the first quarter we praised and exalted Him: for "all things are of God" (v. 18). We learned who God is as our loving Father, the ground and source of all good relationships.

In the second quarter we focused on the center of the message of reconciliation: Jesus Christ. These lessons studied what God has done through Christ: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us . . ." (v. 21). There's no reconciliation apart from Him. We learned what Jesus accomplished as the Prince of Peace, the healer of all relationships.

Remarkably, we are the ministers of reconciliation — God's priests! In this quarterly we survey our role "in Christ." No longer living for ourselves, we are compelled by love to be ambassadors for Christ, bringing reconciliation on His behalf (v. 20). We learn how the church is to be a joyous family, modeling relationship.

Finally, in the fourth quarter we stress that the purpose of God's ministry of reconciliation is nothing less than the new covenant and a new creation: "old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (v. 17). We'll learn how as workers together with God, salvation dawns every day (6:1, 2).

Let's get started on the third quarter!

— *Jason Overman*

Church in Christ

To the church of God . . . to those . . . sanctified in
Christ Jesus . . . (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Read it: 2 Corinthians 5:14 — 6:2; 2 John

Key words: *Father, Son, story, reconciliation*

Think about it: In the first lesson of this series, we claimed that if there is a keyword to associate with reconciliation it is *relationship*: “Reconciliation is the restoration of broken relationships.” We said these two words summarize the whole story of Scripture.

In the last two quarterlies, we studied this story carefully and discovered the truth of that statement. We learned of a loving Father who is the source of all good relationships, and of the human rebellion and brokenness that ruin them. We learned why a ministry of reconciliation was needed and how the God of all things is its author as well.

At the climax of Scripture’s long story, we found our Father and the ministry of reconciliation fully revealed in the Son, the Prince of Peace. He is our Savior and Lord because in the cross, He defeated sin and death and restored life and blessing in His resurrection. If the Father is the source of the ministry of reconciliation, the Son is its center. If God is the author, then Christ is the message.

This sweeping, beautiful story of Scripture makes sense of our own personal stories. Indeed, if we are in Christ, it has become our story. We come now to the astonishing fact that God has committed this story to us, His church. We are its ministers. Returning again to our main series passage, 2 Corinthians 5 unmistakably tells this truth twice: our God “*has*

given us the ministry of reconciliation”; He *“has committed to us the word of reconciliation”* (vv. 18, 19, emphasis added).

Count the pronouns (*we, us*) in the full scripture reading; Paul piles them up. He speaks to the church in Corinth. He speaks to us. The story, ministry, and word of reconciliation are given to the people who have been transformed and restored to covenant partnership with God. We’re now ambassadors of this good news to a world still imprisoned and broken by sin and death (v. 20).

What a responsibility, what a joy — to be priests in this ministry for Christ! It calls us to know the story well. *Do we?* And to tell it well. *Are we?* Most of all, the ministry calls us to live this gospel of loving Father and Prince of Peace. *Will we?*

We can answer yes to these questions only if we are “in Christ.” That short phrase says it all. Paul used it twice in this key passage. “God was in Christ” to reconcile the world; and “if anyone is in Christ,” there is new creation (vv. 17, 19). Christ is the center; God and man meet *in Him*. And the ministry of reconciliation hangs on our union in Christ.

The church distorts the story and its Author and Center when we neglect our calling to know, tell, and live it well. The ministry is ineffectual when Christ is not center. John warned of this: “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God” (2 John 9a). He rejoiced in those who walked in truth (v. 4), then expanded on why that truth causes joy: “He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (v. 9b).

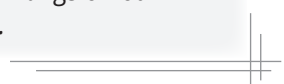
These lessons are dedicated to understanding what it means to be a church in Christ — priests of joy — living and ministering in the Father and the Son.

Answer it

- 1 God has _____ this story to us, His _____ .
- 2 We’re now _____ of the story to a world still imprisoned.
- 3 He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the _____ and the _____ .



The ministry of reconciliation hangs on our union in Christ.



Talk about it

- 1 What is important about the phrase “in Christ” in 2 Corinthians 5:17-19?

- 2 What concern and joy about Christ does 2 John express for the church?

- 3 How well do you know, tell, and live the story of the Father and Son?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer together. Thank the Lord for calling us to be His people and for making us His ministers of reconciliation. This week, consider practices that would help you better know, tell, and live the story of our loving Father and His Son, the Prince of Peace, as priests of joy.

Ministry and Mission

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ . . .
(2 Corinthians 5:20).

Read it: Acts 20:17-24; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Key words: *identity, purpose, service, calling*

Think about it: A church in Christ is a church with a ministry and a mission. The same goes for each of her members. That sounds important, and, of course, it is. What can be more vital than being ambassadors for Christ, ministers on God's mission of global reconciliation? Maybe nothing. But there is something more fundamental than what we do: It is who we are.

Identity is prior to purpose. Before we are called ambassadors *for Christ*, we are new creations *in Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). These terms are closely related, but the order is significant. Who we are influences what we do. Being shapes calling. And *Whose* we are is more central still. We have seen all along that what God does follows from who God is. And we are His.

This takes us back to the earliest part of our story. Before Adam and Eve's divine commission to take dominion over creation, we learn that the first humans were created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-28). Their purposes and partnership with God followed from their identity and relationship to God. As new creations in Christ, we're reminded that Christ has restored and perfected what was lost in Adam, including this order and new identity and purpose in Him.

Who we are in Christ orients our ministry and mission first toward God, the source of our being and vocation, and then outward to the

task He has sent us on. Ministry and mission work in both directions. Worship reinforces our witness. We were made to both adore God and partner in His plan.

We glimpse this same pattern in the priesthood of Israel, which prefigured the perfect to come in Christ. Before Israel was commissioned as a kingdom of priests to the world, God brought her to Himself. Later, in the building of the tabernacle, a priestly family was clothed for ministry that prepared them for the service of God and the congregation (Exodus 19:4-6; 39:41).

We'll look at this priestly pattern more in the next lesson, but for now we notice the profound imagery of Christ and the church. In Christ, we are in intimate relationship with our Maker and readily available for the call to serve as sent. Ministry just means service. Though it sounds official, a minister is a servant. An ambassador for Christ is a servant like Him, for Him.

Paul talked about ministry with the Corinthians more than he did with any other church. Was it because the believers there struggled to understand ministry? He taught that we're ministers of Christ and God, of the Spirit and new covenant, of God's righteousness and reconciliation; ministers to the saints and to all. There are false ministers, too, serving something other than Christ, a purpose following from another identity (cf. 2 Corinthians 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11).

To the elders of Ephesus, Paul briefly described his ministry and his mission. It began in "serving the Lord with all humility" and concluded with "[I do not] count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:17-24).

What a great ambassador of reconciliation! I want to be one like that.

Answer it

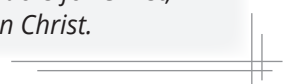
1 _____ is prior to _____. Being _____ calling.

2 Who we are in Christ orients our _____ and _____ first toward God.

3 We were made to both _____ God and to _____ in His plan.



*Before we are called ambassadors for Christ,
we are new creations in Christ.*



Talk about it

- 1 How do our Bible verses order the relationship of identity and purpose?
- 2 How does service relate to worship and witness, God and humanity?
- 3 How does Paul's description of his ministry in Acts 20 help define ours?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Like the apostle Paul, we pray that our ministry and mission are rooted in humble service to our God. May we be bold ambassadors for the gospel of the grace of God. This week, ponder how your identity shapes your purpose, how worship reinforces witness, and how Paul can help you understand your ministry and mission.

Priesthood of Praise

I will also clothe her priests with salvation, and her saints
shall shout aloud for joy (Psalm 132:16).

Read it: Isaiah 61; 1 Peter 2:4-10

Key words: *joy, priests, Spirit, salvation*

Think about it: What does your church look like? What should a church look like? Building on the insights of the last two lessons, the next eleven attempt to answer these questions from different angles. We should recognize the traits chosen and be challenged by them.

A church in Christ is not only telling the story but also living it. We're ministers of reconciliation because we are reconciled ourselves — the evidence of restored relationship with the Father and Son. By the Holy Spirit, we're a new creation and new covenant community, being transformed into the image of God and equipped for His mission.

That's a mouthful! What evidence of the new should we look for? What is the biblical expectation? Let's start with a basic trait and a fruit of the Spirit: joy! We've been running into it in the scripture readings of the last three lessons. As Psalms often sings, where there is salvation, joy rejoices (35:9; 132:16). Jesus has brought salvation! Praise is our joyous response.

Peter tells us this is who we are and how it impacts our calling: "But you are a . . . royal priesthood . . . that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). With joy, worship and witness are simultaneous.

A minister of reconciliation is a priest of joy. Together we are a priesthood of praise, able mediators of "good tidings" and the "oil of joy" to

those grieving and broken, because “everlasting joy” is already ours in Christ! “You shall be named the priests of the LORD” (Isaiah 61:1, 3, 6, 7). We can’t minister what we don’t have. Joy cannot be manufactured; it is grown by the Spirit (v. 1).

As we noted last week, the royal priesthood language comes from Exodus and from Israel’s salvation and commission story (Exodus 19:4-6; 39:41), and it is fulfilled in the new priesthood of Christ and His church. Interestingly, the words *minister* and *ministry* first take center stage in the Bible in the context of the Levitical priesthood, especially the making of the garments the priests were to minister in (28:4; cf. vv. 1-4; 39:1, 26, 41).

Undoubtedly beautiful, these external sacraments of service symbolized the clothing of salvation still to come and the praise that would result through our High Priest. One covenant feature that stands out as enduring across both, however, is priestly praise (2 Chronicles 7:6; 8:14; 30:21; 31:2). It is still so. But now, all are priests in “garments of praise” (Isaiah 61:3).

From Aaron to Isaiah, the pattern and promise of salvation that will fashion a people to proclaim praise is realized in the church: “And the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations” (v. 11).

I write with a smile because I know the joy that defines my church and your own. I also smile because I know we’re capable of singing “Joy Unspeakable” one minute and arguing on Facebook the next. Corinth wasn’t perfect, and neither are we. But if we are in Christ, then we are His priests of praise. Jesus is listening. And so is the world.

Answer it

- 1 As Psalms so often sings, where there is _____, joy _____.
- 2 We are a _____ of praise, able mediators of _____ and the _____.
- 3 A people to proclaim _____ is realized in the _____.

With joy, worship and witness are simultaneous.

Talk about it

- 1 According to Isaiah 61, what role does joy play in our gospel ministry?

- 2 How is the royal priesthood of Exodus and 1 Peter similar, yet different?

- 3 What's your favorite "joy" verse? How is it expressed in and outside of church?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer or sing a song of praise. Make your joy known to God for all He has done in Christ. Truly, the joy of the Lord is our strength. This week, examine yourself, your day. Are you joyful? Are you ministering joy to others? How do you show it in and outside of church service? Practice being a priest of praise.

Family of Faith

Let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).

Read it: Romans 4:16-25; Hebrews 11:1-7

Key words: *believe, united, covenant, righteousness*

Think about it: The church is not only a priesthood of praise but also a family of faith. The ministry of reconciliation is founded on faith because it unites us to Christ, who is both the object of faith and the means of reconciliation. This is good news for a lonely, fragmented world. While the shattering impact of sin on the human family is seen everywhere, faith fosters a new family:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26, 28, 29).

This wonderful passage describes our family tree. Faith in Christ unites us to God as His children, to Abraham's family, and to one another as brothers and sisters. This new family opens its arms to a world of orphans and widows and strangers; faith is its only qualification, regardless of sex, race, nationality, or economic status. All are welcome — but faith transforms.

Our scripture readings focus on two families of faith, Noah and Abraham, that prefigured the faith family born in Christ. These families help us understand what faith is and what faith does. As we read the New Testament reflections on these patriarchs in Romans 4 and Hebrews 11, we remember from earlier lessons that they were covenant

families ("I will establish My covenant with you . . .," Genesis 6:18; 17:2) and that faith is a basic covenant concept. These are families in relationship with God, partnering with Him to restore blessing in the earth (9:1; 12:2, 3).

What does it look like? Covenant faith responds to God's gracious promises just as joy responds to His salvation. God performs the impossible: resurrection life. And we say yes in trust and obedience. Righteousness is God's verdict, accounted to us, when we believe (Romans 4:22; Hebrews 11:7). Righteousness is covenant faith — and faithfulness, because it follows God. Abraham's and Noah's houses were saved because they were defined by this justifying relationship of *believe*.

And so it is with us, but more so in Christ. Right before Paul told us that we are ministers of reconciliation, he said we are ministers of the new covenant and righteousness by the Spirit. Believing the gospel and walking by faith is the foundation of both ministries (2 Corinthians 4:4; 5:7; cf. 3:1-5:7). Here, Paul expressed the attitude and act of faith without using the word:

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant . . . But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us (3:5, 6; 4:7).

We are insufficient of ourselves, but faith ministers power by the Spirit.

Faith is evidence of the unseen; it's impossible to please God without it. The world cannot see God, but it can see our faith: "[It] is spoken of throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8). Ministers of reconciliation: Hold out faith to our alienated world. Priesthood of believers: Guard, defend, and share it. We say, *Believe!*

Answer it

1 _____ is God's verdict, accounted to us, when we believe.

2 We are ministers of reconciliation and ministers of the _____.

3 Faith is _____ of the unseen; it's impossible to
_____ God without it.

*We are insufficient of ourselves, but faith
ministers power by the Spirit.*

Talk about it

1 How do Noah and Abraham show us what a family of faith looks like?

2 How is faith related to and expressed in the larger concept of covenant?

3 Who is your favorite faith character? How does this person inform your faith?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Pray for a faith that moves mountains. We have many in our way. Pray "I believe; help my unbelief." And most of all, praise God for the family of faith and for Jesus, in whom we are one. Reflect next week on how, or if, your faith is seen by those around you.

Sacrifice of Service

Brethren . . . present your bodies a living sacrifice . . .
(Romans 12:1).

Read it: Ephesians 4:30 — 5:7; 1 Corinthians 13

Key words: *love, give, offered, forgive*

Think about it: The church goes by many names in the New Testament. In the last two lessons she has been called a *royal priesthood* and the *household of faith*. In Romans 12:1, we find another: *living sacrifice*.

The construction of this sentence is interesting. Paul urges each member of the church of God in Rome to present their bodies (plural) as a living sacrifice (singular); it is their “reasonable service.” All together, we make one holy sacrifice when freely offered. It is perhaps the most important characteristic of the ministry of reconciliation. But what does it mean?

Sacrifice and *service* are the language of the priesthood and temple worship. The Levites were consecrated as a living offering, committed to the service of God (Numbers 8:15), where animal blood was offered for the atonement of sin (Leviticus 16). In this way, Israel was given a tangible demonstration of forgiveness and its cost.

As ministers of a new covenant, we see these as prefigurations of the loving sacrificial death of Christ (Hebrews 9, 10). But Paul goes a step further and applies this priesthood language directly to us, the church. We must be about the same loving, sacrificial service as our Lord and Savior: “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house,

a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Paul explains to the Ephesians what living, spiritual sacrifices are: "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (5:2). Our love is an imitation of Christ's own cruciform love. How great a love!

Sacrificial language is the perfect metaphor for Christ and God's love (John 3:16) because sacrifice gives life for another. Our spiritual sacrifices make a "living sacrifice" that reflects to the world the sacrificial love of Christ in the church. Love is the wind in the sails of the ministry of reconciliation: "The love of Christ compels us . . ." (2 Corinthians 5:14). We go nowhere without it.

So often the command to love begins with the church learning to love herself: "Love one another; as I have loved you . . . By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34, 35). Think about it. This is the sign that tells the world we are His! Reconciliation came at great cost from a loving Father and Son. They committed this ministry to us, but it depends on us living that love in service to others. Giving our all. The world won't recognize it if we can't even love each other. Our mission begins here!

Cast off bitterness, anger, malice, Paul urges, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31, 32). When we do this, the world sees, and through love, the ministry of reconciliation spreads into the lives of others.

A priesthood of praise and faith must be immersed in love. The Love Chapter (1 Corinthians 13) tells us that "Love never fails." We can make our lists, but "the greatest of these [will always be] love" (vv. 8, 13). "Let's love one another so we can serve others."

Answer it

1 All together, we make one _____ when freely offered.

2 _____ and _____ are the language of the priesthood and temple worship.

3 _____ is the wind in the sails of the ministry of reconciliation.

*The command to love begins with the church
learning to love herself.*

Talk about it

- 1 Why is sacrificial language a perfect metaphor for the love of God/Christ?
- 2 In what specific ways is our love served to others as a living sacrifice?
- 3 What characteristic of love from the Love Chapter do you need more of?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Thank the Father and Son for their sacrificial love that gives us life. May it move us to love them and others. This week, consider how the love of Christ compels you to give of yourself sacrificially, rather than sentimentally. Look for a specific way to express Christ's love for someone in your congregation you find difficult to love.

People of Peace

Let us pursue the things which make for peace . . .
(Romans 14:19).

Read it: Matthew 5:7, 43-45; 2 Timothy 2:19-26; 1 Peter 3:8-16

Key words: *pursue, shalom, kingdom, blessing*

Think about it: If our King is the Prince of Peace, then we are ambassadors of peace. If Jesus preached peace and is our peace, as we learned in the last quarterly, then the ministry of reconciliation is a priesthood of peacemaking.

As a church in Christ whose identity and mission are defined by joy, faith, and love, we are equipped as a people of peace to advance God's righteous reign and shalom in a world of alienation and hostility. Reuniting people to their Maker is the first step in healing that touches every relationship, restoring blessing.

The prophets taught that God's kingdom righteousness would bring shalom (Isaiah 32:17; cf. 9:6, 7). Jesus ministered and made peace as King in life and death (Colossians 1:20-22). In risen authority, He entrusted that "gospel of peace" to His people (Ephesians 6:15). "Blessed are the peacemakers . . . they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Sons are like their Father when they make peace by loving, blessing, doing good, and praying for the enemy (vv. 43-45).

Shalom is not merely peace of mind or the absence of war; it's all things set right, all things made new. This peaceable kingdom remains to be fulfilled in Christ's second coming, but it began in His first coming and continues to grow in His church. As Paul told the Romans, "For the kingdom of God is . . . righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy

Spirit" (14:17). Where the Holy Spirit resides, kingdom peace is present, and God's mission expands through His people.

Almost every epistle begins with a greeting of *grace and peace* to the saints in God and Christ. This recalls both who we are and the reconciling message we possess. But this dying world is a desperate world. It cultivates animosity and alienation, then feeds on it. A rebellious world doesn't want the peace of Christ; it resists it. Because war is the natural state of the flesh (James 4:1, 2), we can't avoid conflict. But we can refuse to participate in it and, rather, face it by the regenerating power of the Spirit, overcoming evil with good (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Romans 12:21).

Peace does not just happen. Peacemaking is pursuing peace. In the next quarterly, we will explore the practical processes of this in specific examples, but for now we attend to the core essentials: the gospel of peace is not passive, but active; not therapy, but conversion; not avoidance, but justice. To be effective ambassadors of peace, we must practice it ourselves, building on the joy, faith, and love we have in Christ. Blessed and being a blessing.

"Let us pursue the things which make for peace . . ." (Romans 14:19; cf. Psalm 34:14; Hebrews 12:14). In our other two scripture readings, Peter and Paul explain "the things": the disposition of ministers of reconciliation and the outcome of that ministry (2 Timothy 2:19-26; 1 Peter 3:8-16).

As priests of peace, our life and work is to embody the blessing of grace and peace in Christ to the world:

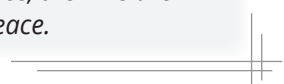
"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26).

Answer it

- 1 The kingdom of God is _____ and _____
and _____ in the Holy Spirit.
- 2 Almost every epistle begins with a greeting of _____ and _____.
- 3 _____ does not just happen. Peacemaking is _____ peace.



*If our King is the Prince of Peace, then we are
ambassadors of peace.*



Talk about it

- 1 Define kingdom *shalom* and its relationship to the ministry of reconciliation.
- 2 Discuss and list what our scripture readings say make for peace.
- 3 How are you pursuing peace and practicing peacemaking?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer or closing song. Pray for peace — that peace that passes understanding in Christ Jesus. Pray that we might be a priesthood of peacemaking in a world desperate for reconciliation. In the coming week, think about specific things that make for peace, and put them into practice.

Ministers of Mercy

“Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

Read it: Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 9:9-13

Key words: *merciful, grace, repentance, act*

Think about it: Just before Jesus taught His disciples “Blessed are the peacemakers,” He said, “Blessed are the merciful” (Matthew 5:9, 7). If there is one possession all ambassadors of peace must have as we head out the door into this broken world, compelled by Christ’s love, it is mercy.

We have celebrated our Father’s great love and grace, revealed in Jesus His Son, from the beginning of this series until now. I want to use the word *mercy* to refer to those concrete acts that make God’s goodness visible, where His reconciling minister meets human beings in their broken need.

Sadly, Jesus had to teach many religious folk of His day what mercy means. Thinking it scandalous that He would socialize with “sinners,” the Pharisees challenged Jesus’ evangelistic methods. His reply is for all of us:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Matthew 9:12, 13; cf. Hosea 6:6).

In a similar situation, Jesus told the beloved parable of the Good Samaritan to all who would justify themselves while negotiating what it means to love their neighbor. It is a familiar story. At the end, Jesus asks us:

"So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?"

And [the lawyer] said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:36, 37).

These two stories illustrate the ministry of reconciliation in action. Whatever our understanding, intention, or feeling, mercy is what we do in the moment. It is how we tangibly show God's gracious love to the lost. This is consistent with the way of God's salvation in Christ: "According to His mercy He saved us . . ." (Titus 3:5). The riches of God's goodness and mercy lead to repentance and salvation, not our condemnation or guilt-tripping (Romans 2:4; Ephesians 2:4). "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).

God's ministers reach the sinner the same way God did: through a radical demonstration of mercy. What might that look like for us? Every evangelical encounter is unique, but the two Gospel stories above give an outline of what God's mercy is, and isn't, and what ingredients are needed to model it.

The central truth of both stories is that, to be put into action, mercy is near the needy. Each story illustrates this from a different point of view. In the first, "many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him . . ." (Matthew 9:10). Here is *accessibility*: Mercy welcomes the sinner at the table. In the second story, "A certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he [the beaten man] was" (Luke 10:33). Here is *availability*: Mercy seeks the wounded in the ditch.

Both stories are given in the context of discipleship: "follow Me," "go and do likewise." Both have repentance and wellness as the goal. We learn mercy is not another word for today's tolerance, but an invitation to transformation by God's grace. From these stories we learn that mercy is courageous, friendly, generous. It cares and calls. Ministers of reconciliation are armed with these.

Answer it

- 1 Mercy refers to concrete _____ that make God's goodness _____.
- 2 God's reconciling minister _____ human beings in their broken _____.

3 The riches of God's goodness and mercy lead to _____
and _____.

Mercy is what we do in the moment.

Talk about it

- 1 Why did Jesus need to teach the religious what mercy and love mean?
- 2 How do our scripture readings show us what mercy looks like in action?
- 3 What does mercy look like — giving and receiving — in your life and church?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Praise the Lord for the riches of His mercy and goodness, whereby we find repentance and are saved. May our lives be instruments of His mercy toward those sick and in sin. This week, be mindful of your accessibility and availability to others and the concrete ways that mercy can be demonstrated in those moments.

Community in Unity

We then, as workers together with Him . . .
(2 Corinthians 6:1).

Read it: Ephesians 4:1-16; Philippians 1:25-30

Key words: *together, workers, one, gospel*

Think about it: The ministry of reconciliation is too big to do alone. No one of us is up to the task. That's why God made the church and filled her with His Spirit. It takes every one of us reconciled to God and working together with Him to accomplish our mission.

We noted earlier how Paul piles on the plurals in our key text: 2 Corinthians 5:14 — 6:2. He never says "I" but repeatedly emphasizes the faith community and our singular goal: God "has given *us* the ministry . . . *we* are ambassadors for Christ . . ." (vv. 18, 20, emphasis added). Still, the temptation remains for us to think of ministry in individualistic terms. It becomes *my* ministry!

But Paul is insistent. Speaking of the new covenant ministry of the Spirit, he writes, "Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart" (4:1). Here is *we* times three, in one sentence. Alone, I will lose heart and hope. I will surely be overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the challenge. Alone I am limited.

Paul is encouraging us in this text. I am not alone; you aren't either. We are together in ministry, together in mercy, together in heart. While I cannot do it alone, we can do it together!

The work of ministry is plural in one sense and singular in another. Ministers of reconciliation, the community of faith, are united and

focused on the one task of bearing and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul writes:

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel (Philippians 1:27).

Our efforts together are to one end: *the gospel*. This is not reductive. It does not mean nothing else matters. On the contrary, it's an expansive statement because the gospel of Christ and ministering that gospel embrace and fulfill the whole story of Scripture, promising a new covenant and new creation. All that matters is in the gospel already.

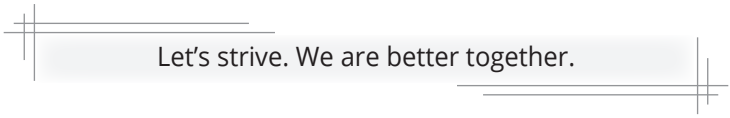
Living and ministering the gospel of Christ takes all of us together, united in one Spirit and one mind. In Ephesians 4, Paul calls the community in unity a body joined and knit together in love, every part cherished and equipped to contribute to the effective work of the whole (v. 16).

One is mentioned ten times in Ephesians 4:1-16. Just as we are striving for the faith of the gospel, so we are "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (v. 3). Paul admits that full unity still lies before us: "till we all come to the unity of the faith and . . . the fullness of Christ" (v. 13). Yet we must walk worthy of our calling and work at unity (v. 1).

Our endeavor to be a community of unity is essential for the edification and effectiveness of ministers of reconciliation. When unity of body and purpose is lost, we are distracted and detoured from the gospel and subject to being tossed by "every wind of doctrine" (v. 14). So let's strive. We are better together.

Answer it

- 1 The temptation remains for us to think of ministry in _____ terms.
- 2 In 2 Corinthians 4:1, *we* appears _____ times in one sentence.
- 3 Our efforts together are to one end: the _____.



Let's strive. We are better together.

Talk about it

1 What are Paul's plurals of ministry, and why are they important?

2 What are Paul's singulars of ministry, and why are they important?

3 What does ministry look like in your life and church, alone or together?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Pray for the Church of God and unity of faith in the Spirit. Pray that we can see ourselves as ministers together, striving for the faith of the gospel of Christ. This week identify how your life and ministry participate in and are nourished by the body of Christ. How can that be improved?

House of the Holy

For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are
(1 Corinthians 3:17).

Read it: 2 Corinthians 6:1-3, 11-18; Ephesians 2:19-22

Key words: *temple, blameless, defile, conduct*

Think about it: After so much time dedicated to 2 Corinthians 5:14 — 6:2 and the ministry of reconciliation, maybe you have noticed the caution embedded in the commission. A closer look reveals that the believers in Corinth were in spiritual danger. Paul pled for *them* to be reconciled to God (5:20) and not “receive the grace of God in vain” (6:1). What was going on?

In part, this epistle sought to reconcile the church to the apostle, from whom they had strayed. But that was a symptom of bigger problems. We can detect this from Paul’s use of another metaphor for the church: the temple of God. Notably, his letters to Corinth tell this truth (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; 6:19). This metaphor continues the priestly imagery we’ve seen applied to the church already, but now evoking a critical function of the priesthood: to “distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean” (Leviticus 10:10). This is vital because the holy temple is the habitation of our holy God.

Paul employed this language because Corinth was not only dealing with division and jealousy but with fornication and idolatry in their midst (1 Corinthians 5, 10). In short, these believers were not distinguishing or maintaining holiness. Paul delivered a grave warning to the church that anyone who defiles the temple will be destroyed (3:17).

Curiously, Paul's sharpest expression of this warning came in the context of the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 6:1-18). Concerned that "We give no offense . . . that our ministry may not be blamed" (v. 3), he desired that the church be together with Him, but not "unequally yoked *together* with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?" (v. 14). Paul continued:

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (v. 16; cf. Leviticus 26:11, 12; Ezekiel 37:26, 27).

This is the covenant language we are now familiar with. The relationship and righteousness that the ministry of reconciliation restores were at risk in Corinth. Defilement was both an existential and a ministerial crisis. The gospel itself is in peril when its ministers ignore the calling: "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15, 16; Leviticus 11:44).

The conduct in Corinth called for a strong rebuke. While the world watched, the church was ruining her witness by conforming to pagan, immoral practices. Paul urged them, still quoting Scripture:

"Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters . . ." (2 Corinthians 6:17, 18; cf. Isaiah 52:11).

At the end of this epistle, Paul worried that many "have not repented of the uncleanness . . ." and said, "Examine yourselves . . . whether you are in the faith" (12:21; 13:5).

This is a cautionary tale. To be holy, the temple of God is to be separated to God for His purposes. This is about the integrity of ministry and ministers, of worship and witness — blameless in conduct: "a holy temple in the Lord . . . built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21, 22).

Answer it

- 1 Priests distinguish between _____ and unholy, unclean and _____.
- 2 For what fellowship has _____ with lawlessness?

3 To be holy is to be _____ to God for His _____ .

Defilement was both an existential and a ministerial crisis.

Talk about it

1 How do Paul's references to the temple speak to the problems in Corinth?

2 Why is holiness and blamelessness vital to the ministry of the gospel?

3 How does your life reflect a Bible-based, Spirit-formed conduct?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Pray that we may be holy as God is holy and growing into a temple of God. May our conduct reflect His righteousness and cast no blame on His ministry. This week, examine your conduct in light of being the temple of the living God.

Nation of the New

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14).

Read it: 1 Peter 2:9-17; 2 Corinthians 3:4-11; 5:17-20

Key words: *light, city, special, people*

Think about it: The church of God is not only a holy priesthood and holy temple ministering to God and world, but also, Peter says, a holy nation. That’s a whole lot of holy! Last week we studied the seriousness of this separation from unrighteousness in our conduct. But this week we’re going to look at another nuance of the word *holy*: special! Read Peter’s full statement:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Peter freely quotes Exodus 19:5, 6, where God identified and commissioned the nation of Israel as His covenant people after saving them from slavery: a special treasure, kingdom of priests, and holy nation. Peter applies all this to the church. Where the old nation failed, God has created an entirely new kind of nation centered on King Jesus and His kingdom. *We’re citizens!*

This special status was never intended as an exclusive “holy club” far from the world’s evils. Just the opposite. *Special* means called out of the darkness and into the light, by God’s mercy. Distinguished from the dark, we now shine as a city on a hill seen by all, a new nation as a light to all the old ones.

Like Peter, Paul draws on Israel's old story. In 2 Corinthians 3:4-11, he contrasts the failed covenant given at Sinai (on stone) with a new covenant of the Spirit (on hearts). Two chapters later, he pairs this new covenant ministry with the ministry of reconciliation and new creation. It is incredible in scope. This holy nation, governed by the politics of King Jesus, ministers the new covenant and new creation as light in the darkness.

Nation of the new, indeed! This is a spiritual mindset and way of life that we must be ever attentive to. As citizens of the kingdom, our relationship to the nations we find ourselves in is reoriented. But as both Peter and Paul taught, the nations we reside in deserve our honor and respect. We aren't anarchists; we submit to authority and pray for our leaders (1 Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13:1-7). But darkness defines all things old, and increasingly so. Our ultimate loyalty is to the light of the new (Acts 5:29).

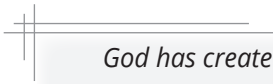
Like Peter and Paul's world, political tension and decay characterize the old nations we reside in. But they don't have to define us. God's holy nation still ministers the new to the old by the mercies of God, and not on the terms of the dark. A holy nation will increasingly minister in the face of indifference, ridicule, and persecution. Get used to it. It was the same for Peter and Paul.

Here's what God's holy nation looks like as it ministers reconciliation to the nations:

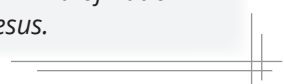
Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation (1 Peter 2:11, 12).

Answer it

- 1 *Special* means called out of the _____ and into the _____, by God's mercy.
- 2 A holy nation will increasingly minister in the face of _____, _____, and _____.
- 3 Political _____ and _____ characterize the old nations we reside in.



*God has created an entirely new kind of nation
centered on King Jesus.*



Talk about it

- 1 How do Peter and Paul use Israel's story to describe who the church is?

- 2 How do we balance loyalties to King Jesus and to the rulers of this world?

- 3 What does being a special, holy nation in your national context look like?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Pray for the wisdom and courage to be a holy nation, a city on a hill, lighting the nations around us. May our loyalty and service be, first, to King Jesus and His kingdom. This week, meditate on how being a holy nation, a special people, relates to or is in tension with the national life of your country.

Bride of Beauty

“Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife”
(Revelation 21:9).

Read it: Revelation 19:1-9; Ephesians 5:25-33

Key words: *wife, attractive, ready, come*

Think about it: We’ve looked at a variety of attributes and metaphors for the church over the last eight lessons. Each one says something important about who we are in Christ, and by the Spirit. All of them contribute to our understanding of what it means to be a minister of reconciliation and what that salvation looks like when lived. Woven together, these attributes and metaphors make a garment of many colors — something shimmering and beautiful. This brings us to one more metaphor.

The church is the bride of Christ. I’ve never seen a bride who took no care for her appearance on her wedding day. I’ve never seen a groom who was not speechless when he saw his bride walk down the aisle. Paul writes that every human marriage points to “Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:32). In that same passage, we read about the wedding preparations:

Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish (vv. 25-27).

The old covenant priests were clothed for “glory and beauty” (Exodus

28:40), and more so the bride of Christ. She embodies beauty from the inside out by virtue of her relationship with Christ. Revelation gives us a glimpse of the ultimate moment when our lives *in Christ* are fully *with Christ*. The priests of joy will celebrate that momentous occasion: "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come . . . His wife has made herself ready" (19:7).

The imagery of the bride has us looking backward to our identity in Christ, and forward to our destiny with Christ. That leaves us in the present, aware that being endowed with the gifts of grace, the church should be beautiful. Robed in salvation, ambassadors for Christ are effective by being attractive.

The prophets predicted it; Paul saw it: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace . . ." (Romans 10:15; Isaiah 52:7). The ministry of reconciliation and its ministers are beautiful and should beckon, because they reflect the presence of God with us and all things new. Darkness ought to shrink from this glory, and those chained be attracted to the light.

In Revelation, when John hears "Come, I will show you the bride . . . the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'" (21:9; 22:17), it's because there's an attractive sight to behold. *You've got to see this!* And the invitation ("come") is potent because the messengers embody the message of peace they share.

A holy nation; a temple of God; a community in unity; ministers of mercy; a people of peace; a loving, living sacrifice; a family of faith; and priesthood of praise: How can we be all these things and not be beautiful? This beauty and glory can be diminished by neglect. They can be marred by the flesh.

"His wife has made herself ready" is instructive. "The washing of water by the word" is ongoing. Together, we must intentionally live these gifts through the Holy Spirit. We have all we need in Christ. May you be beautiful!

Answer it

1 How _____ are the feet of those who preach the _____ of peace.

2 "The marriage of the _____ has come . . . His wife has made herself _____."

3 The Spirit and the bride say, " _____!"

Ambassadors for Christ are effective by being attractive.

Talk about it

1 What do our scripture readings tell us about the beauty of the bride?

2. Are beauty and attraction meaningful to the gospel invitation "Come"?

3 What enhances and undermines the beauty of your life and church?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Let us rejoice and be glad that we are the bride of Christ and belong to Him! May we submit to His cleansing and make ourselves ready to receive Him. This week, consider how your life has been made beautiful in Christ and how that makes you an attractive gospel to others.

Happy in Hope

Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God (Psalm 146:5).

Read it: 2 Thessalonians 2:16, 17; Hebrews 6:9-20; 1 Peter 3:15

Key words: *promises, consolation, confidence, answer*

Think about it: The bride of Christ cannot help but look forward. The 2020 series of quarterlies has been telling the long story of God's reconciliation plan. And we know the end of that story. This makes us a hope-filled bride, anticipating the "happily ever after" to come as we minister the new "now."

Scattered throughout the New Testament, this living and blessed hope is focused on resurrection of the dead and eternal life at the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3; Titus 2:13). This is where new creation ministry is heading and reaches its finish line.

Our future hope has everything to do with how we live and minister as God's people right now — today. Despite the trials and failures and limits of this life, hope transcends our circumstances and roots us in the happy assurance that all God's promises will be realized. Paul tells a congregation facing tribulation and persecution that the loving Father and Prince of Peace "has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace" (2 Thessalonians 2:16). We have confidence and comfort in the Word (Romans 15:4).

The Bible teaches that true hope is no wispy-wish but "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast . . ." (Hebrews 6:19). Our hope is solid ground, rather than thin air, because it rests secure in God and His past acts and fulfilled promises. A hope like this not only energizes our

ministry of reconciliation but also proves to be a resilient and potent witness to a world losing true identity, purpose, and meaning.

As we peer into the darkness, we see hopelessness. It can be frightening. Nihilism has many faces in our society, but what they have in common is the absence of transcendent hope. This is replaced with something artificial that puts confidence in all the wrong things. Such counterfeit hope without a loving Father or His Son cannot see beyond self-interest and self-satisfaction. It is liable to be oppressive because as it fixes ultimate meaning on a self-made identity and purpose, it will demand that everyone affirm the self-delusion.

But we must do more than just peer into the darkness. We must reach into it with the ministry of reconciliation that restores real hope, freeing captives from themselves. Confronting this darkness means that hope-ministry must hear Peter: "Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).

Enjoying the blessed and living hope we have in Christ is one thing. Having a reason ready for those who ask for it is another matter. How do we explain love, faith, joy? How do we explain this sacrifice, family, priesthood? A good, well-informed answer can be communicated logically, carefully, and earnestly. A different response might be to just invite this friend, or skeptic, to come and try out the living hope. Try it on!

It's dark outside, but hope shines. Be of good cheer and "hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end" (Hebrews 3:6).

Answer it

1 Hope is an _____ of the soul, both sure and _____.

2 God has loved us and given us everlasting _____ and good _____.

3 Be ready to give a _____ to everyone who asks you a _____ for the hope that is in you.

Hope is no wispy-wish but "an anchor of the soul."

Talk about it

- 1 Why is hope an important part of the ministry of reconciliation?
- 2 How is the world showing its hopelessness, and how is hope our anchor?
- 3 What is your defense and the reason for the hope that lies in you?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Thank God for the blessed and living hope He has given us through Christ. Pray for one another that we do not lose hope in a hopeless world. May our joyful, confident hope be not just an anchor but light to those in the dark. This week, gain comfort and hope from the Word by reading as many verses as you can find on hope. Memorize one.

Glory to Glory

Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

Read it: Romans 8:9-30; 2 Corinthians 3:6, 8, 9, 18; 5:21

Key words: *Spirit, conformed, creation, image*

Think about it: The first quarter was dedicated to our loving Father and the second to the Prince of Peace. Here at the end of this quarterly, we believe it should be dedicated to the Holy Spirit. Only by the Spirit of the Lord are we priests of joy in Christ. As ministers of reconciliation and the new covenant, we are able ambassadors for Christ only by the Spirit. Our mission rests in Him.

We concluded the last two quarterlies by giving our attention to the glory of God, and we do the same here. To our amazement, we find that through the Spirit of the Lord, God's eternal purposes are being fully realized in sharing His glory with His people. Our destiny rests in Him too.

We all . . . are being transformed into the same image [the Lord's] from glory to glory . . . by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:18).

"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27) has been there all along in our key text. Paul gives this insight: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the point we've been pushing toward from the first lesson of the series. The new covenant relationship is "the ministry of righteousness" by the Spirit of God (3:6, 8, 9), bringing us to the image of Christ. It is one and the same as the ministry of reconciliation. Ministry with any other end than Christ in mind has missed the mark.

This is what Romans 8 is all about: being children of God by the Spirit

of life because of righteousness. Groaning with creation for the full arrival of new creation, we do not count “the sufferings of this present time . . . worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (v. 18). Hope points us in this direction (vv. 24, 25).

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called . . . these He also justified . . . these He also glorified (vv. 28-30).

Remember way back at the beginning? We started in Genesis 1, where God created man in His image. The intimate intentions of that destiny were never realized, but the long story we’ve been studying has shown us the path home through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. His Spirit takes us the rest of the way there: conformed to His image.

This transformation embraces all of creation, but it waits for “the revealing of the sons of God” (v. 19). Still, it is underway, because the Spirit is at work in us. In the final quarterly this year, we’ll look at a few details of life that new creation touches through the ministry of reconciliation. For now, we conclude by acknowledging the tremendous gift of grace that has made us priests of joy and ambassadors for Christ. To Him be the glory!

Answer it

- 1 Christ in you, the hope of _____ .
- 2 We all . . . are being _____ into the same _____ from glory to glory.
- 3 Whom He predestined, these He also _____ ; these He also _____ and _____ .

Ministry with any other end than Christ in mind has missed the mark.

Talk about it

- 1 What is the goal of the ministries of reconciliation and the new covenant?
- 2 According to Romans 8, what role does the Holy Spirit play in God's purposes?
- 3 How has the whole story we've been studying come full circle in this lesson?

Summarize it: Using the four key words, recap the lesson.

Apply it: Start with a closing prayer. Thank God for working out His purpose in our lives. Pray that we would be conformed to the image of His Son, by the Spirit, more and more every day. This week, reflect on the long story we have been studying over the last three quarterlies and on your part in it.